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ABSTRACT

Participant observation, one of the fieldwork techniques of ethnography, requires a definition of and delicate balance between the roles of participant and observer and a clear understanding of the involvement of the researcher in these two roles. Ethnography is the study of the geographical distribution of people and their relation to their environment. For example, an ethnographer might study children and teachers in the classroom, school, community, and home. Research characteristics of ethnography are: (1) that the ethnographer is the research instrument; (2) that a large block of time is assigned in a setting that permits observation of a full cycle of events; and (3) that as much time for analysis and interpretation as for participant observation is allotted. In schools particularly, a researcher may occupy different levels of participation/observation, e.g., active participant, privileged observer, or limited observer. Disadvantages of the technique are inherent in using the individual as the research instrument. No matter how highly trained and objective, the researcher may become too involved, too detached, or be taken ill. The strengths are that the evaluative role of participant observer can lend depth to understanding, produce hypotheses, and uncover patterns. Researchers should expand their readings to include ethnographies, become familiar with anthropological techniques, and develop a concern for research context. (KC)

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THE EVALUATIVE ROLE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Paper given at the 4th Annual Professional Training Institute, National Association for Gifted Children, Tempe, Arrizona, February 21, 1983

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Introduction

I'd like to start with a poem from Shel Silverstein:

When it's green, the light means "go."
When it's red the light means "stop."
But what do you do when the light turns blue
with orange and lavender spots?

Sometimes the questions to be studied in research are not clear green or red signals. Such situations needing exploration may call for the research tool of participant observation. This evaluative role is one of the main methods in ethnographic research.

What is participant observation?

What is participant observation? Sometimes this tool refers to all techniques used in fieldwork (as ethnographic research is often refered to). In its more restricted use, participant observation is one of the fieldwork techniques used by ethnographers.

First, a few explanatory words about the larger concept, ethnography. Ethnography is the study of the geographical distribution of people and their relation to the environment in which they live--a picture of people. Translated to our context, an example is that an ethnographer might be studying children and teachers in gifted education in their classroom, school, community, and home environments. An (usually associated) anthropological perspective might add some of these children's cultural histories and group relations into the picture.

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Ethnography actually has two meanings, (1) referring to a research process (or an inquiry process), or (2) to a research product. The product is some final report for a selected audience. The final report is the true test of an ethnography. Other characteristics include the following:

- The ethnographer is the research instrument, and generally operates practically alone, rather than in a large team.
- The ethnographer uses a large block of time, in our case about a school year, in a setting that permits observation of a full cycle of events (rather than a short-term basis).
- The ethnographer allows, as a rule of thumb, as much time for analysis and interpretation of information as for participant observation (or other tools of collection); that is, for each day of observation--a day for writing, analysis and interpretation is set aside.

What is it that the participant observer looks at?

What is it that the participant observer looks at? The answer is: "Well, it depends." It depends on the following:

- The nature of the problem
- The training and background of the ethnographer
- The developing course of events during the field work
- The process of sorting, analyzing, and writing that transforms the fieldwork experience (with its endless notes) into the completed account. (A series of encompassing and summarizing diagrams or frameworks may emerge.)
- The shape of the final account
- The means used to get the report to the users, and the purposes of the report.

To repeat, the answer to what observers look at is: "It depends." Ethnographers in the field of gifted education might even be looking at small units

of behavior, fine detail, repeatedly viewing segments of video tape revealing teaching/learning style in the gifted classroom or participation structures--but imbedded in cultural context. The observer may operate like a zoom lens on a camera, alternating between figure and ground, figure and ground.

Requirements

The technique of participant observation has several requirments beyond watching and letting the field setting parade before the observer. Participant observation requires a definition of and a delicate balance between the roles of participant and of observer, and a clear understanding of the involvement of the researcher in these two roles.

Participant observation, as one technique of the ethnographer, tries to answer the questions: "What is going on here? What are the behaviors and their meanings?" These questions are asked with the idea that knowing could make a difference. For example, my problem with my settings in Sweden was that for a while I lacked anthropological understanding of a Swedish world view. When I came to appreciate the strong role of "permission consciousness" in the Swedish culture, much of the teacher and child behavior early on during creative problem-solving discussion was explained. The ethnographer using the evaluative tool of participant observation needs shared sets of explanations regarding what is occuring and what it means to others present. A report displays the ring of authenticity, as being natural in the society (or classroom) being described: "Yes, that's what we do and what we say; and that interpretation could explain alot."

Difficulties

Attaining the role of participant observer is difficult. In our case, schools define the role of the "outsider." Often the best anyone can do

is occupy the lowest of three roles. The highest, most productive role is "active participant." The middle one is "privileged observer" and the lowest is only "limited observer." Most people coming into schools are only limited observers. This lowest stage is where my research assistant and I started in our first American kindergarten field site while intending to study a broad context of creative problem-solving behaviors. As we established rapport, we became more privileged observers, free to move among the children when they were doing something promising. To become active particpants we moved into use of related field work tools, removing children to a corner of the room or to an adjoining room for various tasks shown on the handout.

You might think that the role of teacher would be ideal for participant observer. But teachers are so caught up in the managerial, clerical, and teaching aspects that the looking and time to record and analyze becomes very difficult. Assisting aides and volunteers can help. In a course I offer at NTSU, the students who are teachers are encouraged to play participant observer roles. Universersity class time is a powerful stimulus to them. In addition to observation notes they bring mappings of their classrooms, updates on sociograms, artifacts of selected child works, and "archival" records from school files, collected in the manner of ethnographers.

With respect to alternative ways of becoming participant observers, I am amused to think of the anthropoligist Spindler's solution, when he himself became as a student in a third-grade German classroom. I can see in my mind's eye, that huge George Spindler squeezed into a child's desk in a rural German School.

Disadvantages of the tool of participant observer are of course inherent in using the individual as the research instrument--no matter how highly trained and objective. The individual may become too involved,

too detatched, be taken ill, etc.

Strenghts of the Tool

Now let's look at some strenghts in the use of participant observation. What better evaluative instrument for analyzing human behavior than another alert human? I would say that the evaluative role of participant observer can lend depth of understanding, be productive of hypotheses, and uncover patterns. Its use can add a crucial dimension to our study of the gifted.

All of us have been participant observers in our lives. That is how we have accomplished much evaluation and growth. We have not just used manageable, codable, punchable forms. We watch and we ask. In becoming functional human beings, we have all relied on numerous sources ("triangulation"), taking ample time to attend to many, many, if not all significant facets--not just a few easy to understand, or to just those that can be easily counted, or that can satisfy vigorous statistical tests. Most of us go on to look not only at unique detail, but also to note shared characteristics in common with other instances, events, or cases. The ethnographer looks for the generic in the specific and might ask, for example: "Of what is this case of a gifted child representative?"

Summary

Attempting to define participant observation as an item in the collection of tools used by ethnographers, I have described briefly what an ethnographer does, what it is that the technique of participant observer looks at, some requirements, the difficulties, and some strenghts and contributions. Finally, I offer some recommendations to researchers willing to explore this technique further.

Recommendations

1. Expand your own reading to include ethnographies. (See references.)

2. Become familiar with a variety of anthropological techniques, ways of finding out, related to and including participant observation.

3. Develop a concern for context. Probe for more; be aware of richness and complexity. This putting in of context may be this research thrust's most important contribution. making research more interesting and valuable to teachers. This tool, participant observation, may even help to explain what happened when the light turns blue with orange and lavender spots.

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